

Points of Interference in Learning English as a Second Language

Tone

Spanish: In both English and Spanish there are four tone levels, but Spanish speaker use only the three lower –pitch tones, except when they express extreme anger or alarm. Then the fourth, upper-pitch tone is used.

Stress

Spanish: Most Spanish words are stressed on the last or next -to-last syllable; most English words are stressed on the first or second syllable. In English a word may have two or three stresses; Spanish generally uses only one stress except for a few adverbs.

Pronunciation

Asian Languages: Chinese use a tone system for distinguishing word meanings. Words having the same pronunciation may have four or more different tones to represent different meanings. These meanings would be represented by four written forms.

Black Dialect: In words where /r/ and /l/ appear in medial or final position, dialect speakers often drop these sounds. Dialect speakers often change the pronunciation of English words with a medial or final *th*, saying “wit” or “wif” for “with” and “muver” for Mother.

Vowels

Spanish: Spanish does not have short vowel sounds for *a*, *i*, *o*, and *u*, as English does, although there are five vowel sounds in Spanish with *corresponding sounds in English: a as in father, e as in step, i as in machine, o as in over, and u as in ooze.*

Consonants

Spanish: Consonant sounds *v*, *b*, *d*, *t*, *g*, *h*, *j*, *l*, *r*, *w*, *v*, and *z* are not the same in Spanish as in English, and students must be taught the point of articulation to produce these sounds in order to become aware of the differences.

Asian Languages: the schwa sound that is used in English does not exist in Chinese, Japanese, or Korean. Chinese speakers usually cannot distinguish the English sounds /v/ and /b/ or /l/ and /r/. Cantonese speakers use /l/ and /n/ interchangeably.

Consonant Clusters

Spanish: Spanish words never begin with the following consonant clusters: *speak, stay, scare, school, street, spring, scratch, sphere, slow, small, svelte*. Spanish speakers will add an initial vowel when pronouncing such words: *estreet, espeak*. Spanish speakers often have problems with the 371 consonant-cluster endings used in English.

Spanish speakers are often confused by the use of English *s* endings to indicate a plural noun but a singular verb.

There is a strong carryover from the Spanish /ch/ to the English /sh/, and the student may say “Share” for “chair” and “shoes” for “choose.”

The /b/ and /v/ sounds in Spanish are exactly alike phonetically in that each has two sounds. Which sound is used is determined by the surrounding sounds.

Asian Languages: Cantonese has no consonant clusters, and as a result Cantonese speakers usually hear and pronounce just one of the sounds in an English cluster. Since there are so many consonant clusters in English, this creates severe problems. Many English clusters are formed or augmented by important syntactical elements, as in the expression *What’s this?*

The additional of /’s/ forms a cluster that gives an important clue to the meaning of the sentence, but the Cantonese student can neither hear nor say it.

Explicit plural markers are not used in Chinese or Japanese. The spoken language does not contain the sibilant /s/ sound. Plurals are formed by placing auxiliaries before the noun. An example (translated literally into English) is “*three boy.*”

Black Dialect: When two or more consonant sounds appear at the end of words, they tend to be reduced by dialect speakers: / tes/ for “test” and /des/ for “desk.” This reduction in consonant clusters affects words ending in /s/, third-person singular forms, and possessives.

Word Endings

Spanish: Spanish words can end in any of the five vowels (*a, e, i, o, or u*) or any of the following consonants: /l/, /d/, /r/, /z/, /j/, /y/, /n/, or /s/. Spanish speakers often have difficulty with words ending in /m/, /p/, /k/, /c/, /b/, /d/, /f/, /g/, /l/, /y/, /v/, and /x/, (when voices as /z/).

Asian Languages: Chinese, Japanese, and Korean speakers tend to drop, glottalize, or add a vowel to the English words endings /t/, /d/, /s/, /l/, /p/, /b/, /k/, /f/, /g/, /r/, and /v/. For instance, they may pronounce “college” as “collegi” and “church” as “churchi.”

Grammar

Verbs

Spanish: Spanish speakers often have problems distinguishing between the uses of the simple past (“he worked”) and present perfect (“he has worked”) because the rules for their use are different in Spanish. Spanish speakers are also confused by the double meaning of the *ed* ending, which is in part comparable to the Spanish *ado*, which signifies the past participle, and in part comparable to the endings for the simple past.

Asian Languages: The Chinese verb has only one form and is not conjugated to indicate tense. Tenses are formed by placing auxiliaries before or after the stable verb form.

Black Dialect: The use of the verb to be is different in black dialect. Often it will be absent in situations in which a contraction is used in Standard English, especially in the present tense. For example, dialect speakers say “I here” and “We going.”

Dialect speakers drop the “ed” ending on the past tense in both speech and writing.

Negative Black Dialect: The use of more than one negative form is acceptable in black dialect sentences like “I don’t take no stuff from nobody.”

Word Order

Spanish: Spanish speakers need to cultivate the idea that English relies heavily on word order to indicate grammatical relations where Spanish relies on morphological change. Word order is sometimes flexible in Spanish, but never in English. This difference leads to confusion when Spanish speakers translate direct and indirect questions literally. For example, the question “What are you doing”, may be stated in Spanish as “I do not know what you are doing.” The distinction in Spanish lies in the form of “What” *-/que/* versus */lo que /*, in this example, rather than word order.

In Spanish the adjective usually follows the noun and must agree with it in gender and number. In English the adjective usually precedes the noun.

In Spanish the adverb usually follows the verb, rather than following the direct object-for example, *Yo Jose vi inmediatamente...* (“I saw Jose immediately...”).

Asian Languages: Chinese do not manipulate word order to change meaning. For example, it is impossible in Chinese to reposition is to convert a statement to a question, as in “He is a teacher” and “Is he a teacher?”

Articles

Spanish: In Spanish, articles are placed in some positions where English does not require them-for example, *Veo al doctor Brown* (“I see the Doctor Brown”).

Asian Languages: The Articles “a” is used in Chinese for a very specific reason, as a unit for measure rather than a general article as in English. Korean and Japanese use only function words or function particles that follow content words, unlike English, which uses a combination of function words (articles and auxiliary verbs) as well as word endings to show grammatical distinctions.

Comparative and Superlative

Spanish: Spanish Speakers tend to express comparative and superlative by using *more* and *most*, where English uses *-er* and *-est*; thus expressions like, “He is more big” or “He is the most tall student” reflect Spanish structure.

Pronouns

Asian Languages: In both Mandarin and Cantonese, a single sound represents the pronouns *he* and *she*; however, the written forms for these and the other third –person singular forms are very distinct. Often Chinese students use the spoken “he” for both “he and “she.”

It-There

Spanish: In Spanish one word (*es*) is used for *it is*, *there is* and *there are*. *Asian Languages:* Words like *there* and *it* in expressions like “It is cold” and “There are many clouds” do not exist.

Black Dialect: Dialect speakers use *it* for *there*. For example, instead of “There’s a rug on the floor,” they say, “It’s a rug on the floor.”

Spelling

Spanish: Although both Spanish and English have words of Latin origin, Spanish spelling does not use the following doubled or combined consonants: /bb/, /dd/, /ff/, /gg/, /mm/, /pp/, /ss/, /th/, /zz/, /gh/, /ph/, or /hn/. As a result, English spelling patterns using these forms are confusing for the Spanish speaker.

There are similar words in Spanish and English, which create false analogies and confusion. For example, *Lectura* means “reading,” while the Spanish equivalent of “lecture” is *conferencia*.

Asian Languages: Dictionary skills must be taught Asian students, for the Chinese dictionary does not list words in alphabetical order, but by the traditional word-radical groups and the number of strokes each character has. Both Japanese and Koreans share the Chinese ideographic writing system, but Japanese uses a supplementary syllabic system and Korean uses a supplementary alphabetic system.

Black Dialect: Dialect speakers have difficulty spelling word endings and vowel sounds in syllables they do not pronounce or hear.

Dialect speakers attach meanings to words that are different from the meanings in Standard English and are based on different experiences. For example, the words *bad* and *poor* may be used to mean “good.”

